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ABSTRACT

A representative survey of over 30,000 people aged 16-64 years across the 15 member states of the European Union and Norway sought Europeans' preferences for increasing or reducing the number of hours worked per week. Key finding included the following: (1) 51% preferred to work fewer hours in exchange for lower earnings while 12% preferred to work longer hours; (2) substantial part-time hours (20-34) or moderate full-time hours (35-59) were the most widely preferred arrangements; (3) men preferred a 37-hour work week while women preferred a 30-hour week; (4) those most likely to prefer part-time hours were women with young children; (5) fatherhood had less influence on men's preferences for work hours; (6) more than half of the respondents prefer taking time off, in such forms as "time banking" or flextime, in compensation for overtime work; and (7) 23% said they would take unpaid leaves if available, and this figure rose to 30% of those employees in higher income brackets. Issues raised by these results included the following: (1) collective reduction of full-time hours; (2) improvement in the quality and amount of part-time work; and (3) help for parents to combine employment and family responsibilities. (Partial solutions in France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom were described. Included are 6 tables and 5 figures.) (AJ)

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Gender, Employment and Working Time Preferences in Europe

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GENDER, EMPLOYMENT AND WORKING TIME PREFERENCES IN EUROPE

In 1998 the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions carried out a major survey on Employment Options of the Future across the 15 EU Member States and Norway. Who wants to work? When? Why? These were the major questions examined in the survey, which sought the views of people currently in paid employment or who intend to enter the labour market within the next five years. This leaflet summarises the main findings of the survey concerning men's and women's preferences for increasing or reducing the number of hours that they work per week.

Key findings

- The number of hours currently worked by many of the European workforce is not in line with their working time preferences. Half (51%) of those in employment would prefer to work fewer hours in exchange for lower earnings, and 12% would prefer to work longer hours.
- The general preference of both men and women is to discontinue the extremes of very short part-time (under 20 hours) and long full-time hours: substantial part-time hours (20-34 hours) or moderate full-time hours (35-39 hours) are the most widely preferred arrangements.
- On average employed men would prefer a 37-hour week and employed women a 30-hour week. Job seekers have similar working time preferences to those in employment.
- Twenty-two per cent of men and 37% of women who are currently employed full-time would prefer to work part-time. A total of 26% of employed men and 53% of employed women favour remaining in, or switching to, part-time work.
- It is women with young children who are the most likely to prefer part-time hours. Mothers with older children prefer slightly longer hours.
- Fatherhood has little influence on the number of hours that men would prefer to work. However, more than one in five fathers would prefer to work part-time.
- Preferences for full-time work should not be overlooked, including the part-timers who would prefer full-time work (24% of the men and 18% of the women who are currently employed part-time).
- Overtime is widespread among full-time employees, and many part-timers also provide this form of flexibility for employers. Just over half of those who work overtime are able to take time off in compensation through some form of 'time banking' or flexitime system.
- Twenty-three per cent of all employees said that they would take unpaid sabbaticals if available, rising to 30% of employees if compensated at 50% of net earnings.

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Introduction

Working time and the 'work-life balance' is a topic of much public debate. The number of hours worked in employment is an important part of this debate, alongside related issues such as the organisation or scheduling of working time. In this leaflet we focus on the current and preferred weekly number of working hours of women and men. Do they want to reduce or increase the number of hours they spend in paid employment? How many hours would they prefer to work? Do parents have different working time practices and preferences compared to men and women without dependent children? Are there differences between the self-employed and employees, and between employees with different occupational positions?

Working time preferences do not provide a 'hard' or perfect measure of future behaviour, for constraints and other priorities also affect outcomes. For example, not everyone who says that they would like to work part-time would do so immediately if this option were offered to them. However, women and men's preferences do influence their plans, decisions and behaviour. Preferences also provide an indicator of the quality of working conditions, for being 'overworked' or 'under-employed' can be considered a sub-optimal arrangement and a potential source of job dissatisfaction.

Preferences also adapt to changes in circumstances and policy interventions. For example, one factor influencing women's preferences for reduced hours is whether they have young children to care for, and whether there are suitable childcare services available to ease the demands on their time. Women's working time preferences adapt towards increasing their working hours when their children are older, or if policy innovation produces an expansion of childcare services that makes it easier to combine employment with raising a family.

Thus, information about women's and men's preferences and the reasons why they hold these preferences can shed light on the kind of policy developments that Europeans would like. In turn, analysis of how preferences vary in relation to domestic and employment circumstances makes it possible to reflect on the conditions and policy environment under which certain types of work arrangements might increase or diminish.

Table 1 Working time preferences of men and women

Preference	Men (%)	Women (%)	All (%)
To work current weekly hours	34	40	37
To work shorter weekly hours	57	44	51
To work longer weekly hours	9	16	12
Total	100	100	100

Base: The employed population aged 16-64 in the EU15 + NOR, 1998.

Adjustments to weekly working hours

Nearly two in three employed persons would prefer to change the number of hours that they work per week (Table 1). Half (51%) would prefer to work fewer hours (including only 2% who would prefer to leave employment) in exchange for lower earnings, and 12% would prefer to work longer hours. Employed men are even more likely to want to reduce their hours of work than employed women. Conversely a higher percentage of employed women are under-employed and would like to work longer hours (16%). Overall, employed men are more likely to want to change their hours than employed women, and in this sense they have been less able to find their preferred working hours in the labour market. However, another part of the explanation is that women are more likely than men to exit the labour market for child raising and other care responsibilities if they require less time consuming jobs but

Table 2 Preferred rate of adjustment to weekly working hours

Preference	Under 20 (%)	20-34 (%)	35-39 (%)	40-49 (%)	50 + (%)	All (%)
Reduce hours by 15+	1	2	9	10	56	16
Reduce hours by 5-15	5	10	22	43	25	27
Reduce hours by 4 or less	1	4	15	9	*	8
Total who would prefer shorter hours	7	16	46	62	81	51
Total who would prefer to work current hours	40	54	46	34	18	37
Increase hours by 4 or less	7	3	4	1	*	2
Increase hours by 5-15	20	17	4	3	1	6
Increase hours by 15+	26	10	*	*	*	4
Total who would prefer to work longer hours	53	30	8	4	1	12
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

* less than 0.5%.
Base: The employed population aged 16-64 in the EU15 + NOR, 1998.

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are unable to secure shorter working time arrangements.

Preferences for adjustments to hours are clearly related to the current number of hours worked (Table 2). The proportion who want to reduce their hours rises with the number of hours that they currently work, particularly for those in full-time jobs. Over 80% of those working very long hours (50 and over) would prefer a shorter working week. It is part-timers, particularly those in short part-time jobs (20 hours or less) who are the most likely to want to increase their hours. More than half of those in short part-time jobs and nearly one in three working substantial part-time hours (20-34 hours) would prefer to work longer hours.

This preference to discontinue working very short or very long hours applies to both women and men, while reflecting the existing pattern of gender differences in working hours. Employed women currently work fewer hours than men on average, because they work shorter full-time hours and are also more likely to be employed part-time. When working full-time, women are even more likely than men to want exit long hours than men with a similar number of working hours. The minority of men who work part-time are even more likely to want to increase their working hours than women part-timers.

Clearly the number of hours currently worked by many part-timers and full-timers in Europe is not in line with their working time preferences. The most unpopular arrangements are very short or very long working time schedules. Put another way, it is those women and men with substantial part-time (20-34 hours) or moderate full-time (35-39 hours) working hours that are the least likely to want to change their hours. However, some of those in employment who currently occupy this middle ground also want to change, mainly switching between moderate full-time and part-time hours.

The amount of adjustment that most people want to make is considerable, particularly when seen as a proportion of their current hours (see Table 2). As Table 3 shows, on average employed men would prefer a 37-hour week and employed women a 30-hour week. This translates into an average reduction of six hours a week for employed men and four hours for employed women. If this adjustment took place then one result would be a smaller gender difference in the number of hours in paid employment than currently exists. The spread of preferences is wide, but the general picture is that more men and women would prefer to work in the middle ground of 20-39 hours than occurs in current arrangements. On average job seekers have similar working time preferences to the employed.

Table 4 Family commitments of the workforce

- 33% have a child in their household who is aged 14 years or less
- 9% have a child in their household who is aged under 3 years
- 14% of mothers and 3% of fathers are single parents without a resident partner
- 11% have care responsibilities for elder relatives or other adults in need of assistance, rising to nearly one in five of the workforce aged 50 years or older.

Base: The employed and job-seeking population aged 16-64 in the EU15 + NOR, 1998.

Children and care responsibilities

At any given time a large proportion of the workforce have children or other care responsibilities which make demands on their time, and most people will take on these commitments at some stage in their lives (Table 4). Most of this care work is done by women, but men's contribution is increasing slowly as gender roles modernise due to a combination of changing economic conditions and social attitudes. Single parents, most of whom are

Table 3 Distribution of current and preferred weekly working hours

Weekly hours	Employed men		Job-seeking men	Employed women		Job-seeking women
	Current (%)	Preferred (%)	Preferred (%)	Current (%)	Preferred (%)	Preferred (%)
Under 20	3	4	5	14	11	9
20-34	6	19	21	25	44	44
35-39	22	34	26	26	26	19
40-49	44	34	43	28	17	27
50 plus	25	9	5	7	2	1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Average	43	37	35	34	30	30

Note: The analysis is based on the people who provided information about their actual and or preferred hours. 'Job seekers' are people who want a job immediately or within the next five years.
Base: The population aged 16-64 in the EU15 + NOR, 1998.

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women, face particular difficulties in combining employment with looking after their children. The time demands of raising children start to lessen as children grow up, but often it is at this stage in life that other care responsibilities for elderly or incapacitated parents start to increase. Thus policies to improve the 'work-life' balance are relevant to most of the working-age population, and certainly to their children and other relatives in need of care.

It is widely accepted that mothers of young children are less likely to be in employment, and when employed they are more likely to work part-time or shorter full-time hours compared to men and childless women. Usually women increase their hours of work as their children grow older and make fewer demand on their time (see Figure 1). Employed mothers are more involved in part-time jobs (under 35 hours) and less likely to work long or very long full-time hours compared to childless women. Employed mothers of young children aged under 6 years work the shortest hours.

Figure 1 Current and preferred weekly working hours of employed women, by the age of their youngest child

Note: The employed population aged 16-64 in the EU15+NOR, 1998.

Table 5 Working time preferences of employed and job-seeking mothers

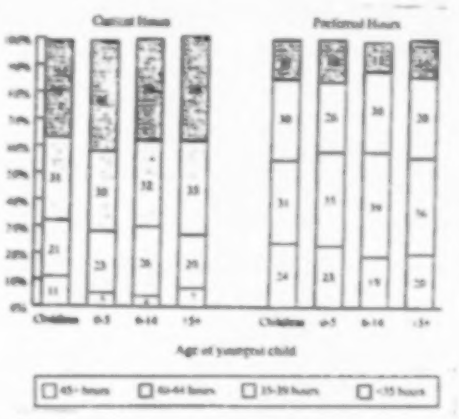
	Average number of weekly hours		
	Employed women		Job seekers
	Current	Preference	Preference
Childless	36	33	32
Child < 6	30	27	28
Child 6-14	32	29	28
Child aged 15+	34	31	30

Note: The employed and job-seeking population aged 16-64 in the EU15 + NOR, 1998.

This influence of the age of the youngest child on women's working hours is mirrored in their working time preferences. It is women with young children who are the most likely to prefer part-time hours – they prefer longer hours if their children are older – and childless women are the most likely to prefer weekly hours of 40 or more. It is equally striking, however, that more women would prefer to work substantial part-time hours than currently do so, regardless of whether they have children or of the age of their youngest child. Conversely, the proportion who prefer working hours of 40 or over is less than the proportion of women who currently work these hours, even among childless women. Thus, most women prefer substantial part-time or moderate full-time hours, regardless of their maternal responsibilities. Mothers who are not employed, but would like employment within the next five years have similar working time preferences to employed mothers (Table 5).

Fathers work slightly longer hours than childless men, but overall fatherhood has little influence on the number of hours that men work, or men's working time preferences (Figure 2). The picture for men is overwhelmingly dominated by the preference to exit long full-time hours, whether they have children or not. However, a sizeable minority of fathers would prefer to work part-time – many more than currently do so – which in principal would make them more available to share childcare responsibilities with their partners.

Figure 2 Current and preferred weekly working hours of employed men, by the age of their youngest child



Note: The employed population aged 16-64 in the EU15+NOR, 1998.

Country differences

Within this average picture of the 15 EU Member States and Norway there are national differences in current working time arrangements or the 'working

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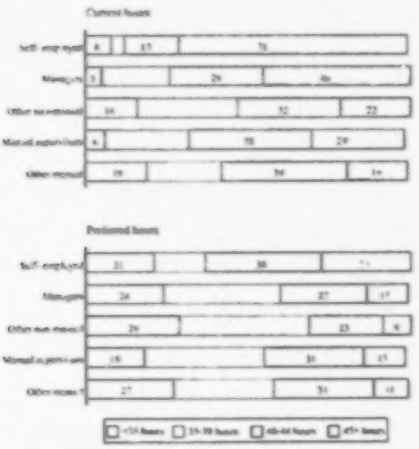
time regime'. These are produced by the different national policy frameworks, with working time regulations, wage structures, fiscal incentives and childcare systems playing particularly influential roles. One national difference is the variation in the number of hours worked by full-timers and by part-timers, for men as well as women. Another key difference is in the level and form of women's employment in their child-rearing years. For example, the highest employment rates for women with young children are generally found in the Nordic countries, where childcare and family leave provisions are the most developed. Mothers who are employed typically work short part-time hours in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, longer part-time hours in Sweden, and full-time in a variety of countries including Finland and Portugal.

Do working time preferences vary between countries? The predominant finding is that there is less national variation in working time preferences than in the current working time arrangements. In each country there is a spread of preferences across the middle range of substantial part-time or moderate full-time hours, and the average number of working hours that those in employment and job seekers would prefer to work is less than the current average, for both men and women. For men, the preferred average ranges from just over 34 hours in Denmark to 38 hours in Portugal and Austria. For women, the preferred average falls between 29 and 34 hours in 12 countries, with women in Greece preferring a 35 hour week and women in the United Kingdom (28 hours) and the Netherlands (25 hours) preferring shorter average hours.

Figure 3 Current and preferred weekly working hours of employed men, by self-employment and employees' occupational status

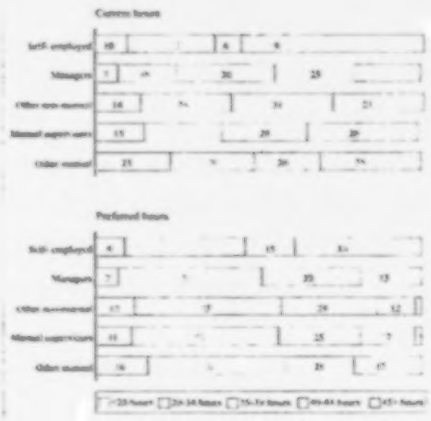


Base: The employed population aged 16-64 in the EU15+NOR, 1998.

Occupational and professional status

The self-employed work the longest hours on average, followed by employees with managerial or supervisory responsibilities (Figures 3 and 4). Compared to the occupational differences in current hours there is less variation in preferences (Table 6).

Figure 4 Current and preferred weekly working hours of employed women, by self-employment and employees' occupational status



Base: The employed population aged 16-64 in the EU15+NOR, 1998.

Thus, the average self-employed man currently works 52 hours per week and would prefer to work 39 hours. The men who work the shortest average hours are manual employees; on average they work 38 hours a week and would prefer to work 36 hours. Women work shorter hours than men in each professional category, but like men, those women who are self-employed or managers work longer hours than other women. On average, self-employed women prefer longer hours than other employed women, but at 33 hours this is only 4 hours more than the average preferences for 29 hours of women who are manual employees.

As might be anticipated from the previous analysis in Table 2, a higher proportion of the self-employed and managers wanted to reduce their hours compared to those in other employment positions, and this is related to their longer average hours of work. In contrast, manual employees were the most likely to want to increase their hours of work. This is driven by financial considerations, for manual jobs tend to be the lowest paid, and it is the low paid or those with financial difficulties who are the least willing to trade reduced earnings for reduced working hours.

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Table 6 Current and preferred weekly working hours, by professional status

Professional status	Employed men		Employed women	
	Current	Preferred	Current	Preferred
Self-employed	52	39	39	33
Managers	45	37	37	32
Other non-manual employees	39	35	32	30
Manual supervisors	42	38	32	30
Other manual employees	38	36	30	29

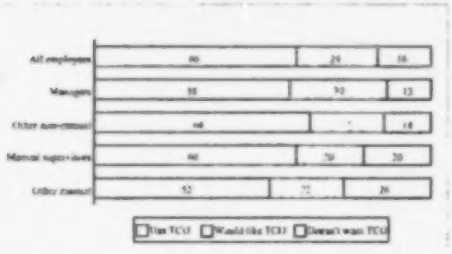
Base: The employed and job seeking population aged 16-64 in the EU15 NOR, 1998.

Overtime, sabbaticals and part-time work

Overtime is widespread among employees: 67% of male employees and 58% of female employees work overtime, of which one in five regularly work overtime at least once a week. Many employees who work long hours are regularly working overtime. Overtime is less common for part-timers, but is still quite extensive, indicating that part-timers also provide this form of flexibility for employers. Just over 10% of part-timers work overtime at least once a week and more than one in three work overtime on a less regular basis.

Just over half of those who work overtime are able to take time off in lieu (57% of male employees and 60% of female employees) through some form of 'time banking' or flexitime system. Time-compensated overtime is most common in the public sector and large private sector companies. It is least common for those in manual (blue collar) jobs. A quarter of employees work overtime without this form of compensation and would favour this arrangement, particularly managers (Figure 5). Manual (blue collar) employees were the least likely to prefer time-compensated overtime, probably because many of them receive overtime pay that they can not afford to forgo for time off instead.

Figure 5 Time-compensated overtime (TCO) arrangements for employees who work overtime



Note: TCO refers to 'time-compensated overtime', which means working-time systems in which time off can be taken at a later period to compensate for overtime.
Base: The employed population aged 16-64 in the EU15+NOR, 1998.

The idea of sabbaticals (extended leave with the right to return to the current job) was popular, and there were few differences by gender. More than half (58%) of employees thought sabbaticals would be useful, mostly for a period of 3-12 months. Expressed as a proportion of all employees, 23% said that they would take unpaid sabbaticals, rising to 30% if compensated at 50% of net earnings.

Finally, labour market opportunities for part-time work do not match the preferences of the workforce. More than one in five men who are currently employed full-time would prefer to work part-time (22%), as would 37% of the women who are employed full-time. They would prefer to work part-time so that they would have more time for themselves and their families, often for a fixed rather than indefinite period of years. The main reasons why these full-timers had not switched to part-time work were because they thought their current employer would not accept it or that it would not be possible to organise their job on a part-time basis. The reduction in earnings and the fear of inferior treatment in social protection and labour law were also mentioned, but less frequently. When taken together with those who are already employed part-time because they expressly state that they do not want full-time hours for a variety of reasons, then a total of 26% of employed men and 53% of employed women favour part-time work, as do 38% of all job seekers.

These results suggest that an expansion of opportunities for part-time work in Europe would be welcomed by many men and women. However, the preferences of other members of the workforce should not be overlooked. The majority of full-timers want to continue in full-time work, although with a general preference for shorter hours. Likewise, some part-time work is an 'involuntary' response to limited labour market alternatives: 24% of the men and 18% of the women who are employed part-time said that they had taken these jobs because they had been unable to find full-time employment.

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Conclusion

The survey provides evidence that many full-timers would prefer substantially shorter hours, reducing their wages accordingly. This includes a sizeable proportion of full-timers who would welcome increased opportunities to work part-time. At the same time many part-timers want to increase their hours, and some have been unable to find full-time employment. The preferred arrangements generally fall in the range of substantial part-time (20-34 hours) or moderate full-time hours (35-39 hours), with little support for short part-time or long full-time hours. Opportunities for employees to vary working hours over a longer period – for example with time-compensated overtime arrangements or sabbaticals – are also popular.

These results raise a number of issues for employment policy, including the collective reduction of full-time hours, improving the quality and amount of part-time work, and developing other means of helping parents to combine employment with family responsibilities. This combination of developments would enhance the work-life balance for the workforce by providing them with more scope to obtain their preferred working time arrangements over their lifetime as their circumstances change.

Further research on a number of related issues is needed to improve our knowledge of the preferences and trade-offs that the employed population is prepared to make for reductions in full-time hours, such as whether they would prioritise reductions over wage rises in the next bargaining round, or the type of work re-organisation they would exchange for shorter hours. It is also important to explore preferences for different working time schedules when considering the preferred number of hours.

It is difficult for people to convert their preferences into actual working time reductions through individual negotiations with current or alternative employers. Public debate and collective action by the social partners and civic pressure groups is needed to broaden the politics of time. Such actions are occurring in some societies where there is an established tradition of regulating working time. For example, the state has intervened to regulate a reduction in full-time hours in France with the Aubry law, and in the Netherlands full-time hours are falling alongside an expansion in part-time work as a result of state policies and collective bargaining. But in some countries such as the United Kingdom the debate has barely started, and it is there that the imbalance of very long full-time hours and marginal part-time hours is most in danger of growing.

About the Employment Options of the Future Survey

This survey was commissioned by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions in association with the Norwegian Royal Ministry of Labour. It is a representative survey of over 30,000 people aged 16-64 years across the 15 EU Member States and Norway. Computer-assisted telephone interviews were carried out in each country using a standard questionnaire in 1998. The sample was drawn by random dialling methods to contact households and within household by random selection of eligible persons. The fieldwork and preparation of the dataset was co-ordinated by Institut Burke Sozialforschung.

Definitions used

The information on people's current and preferred weekly hours were collected in two questions: 'In total, how many hours per week do you work at present - *on average?*' (question 55) and 'Providing that you (and your partner) could make a free choice so far as working hours are concerned and taking into account the need to earn a living - how many hours per week would you prefer to work at present?' (question 56).

The measure of working hours used is the average current weekly hours, including overtime. The following categories were defined: 'short part-time' (less than 20 hours) 'substantial part-time' (20-34 hours) 'moderate full-time' (35-39 hours), 'long full-time' (40-49 hours) and 'very long full-time' (50 plus hours).

'Job seekers' are people who said that they wanted to find employment immediately or within the next five years. 'Manual supervisor' is a manual worker with supervisory responsibilities.

This leaflet was prepared by Dr Colette Fagan, University of Manchester, and Dr Tracey Warren, University of Nottingham and is based on their report, *Gender, employment and working time preferences in Europe*, published by the Foundation in 2001. The authors are grateful to Mia Lasta and Agnès Parent-Thirion, Foundation research managers, for their helpful comments.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Information about Foundation publications is available on the Foundation website at www.eurofound.ie. For information on other publications in the *Employment options of the future* series, please contact

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